

A Secret Mission by **darthstormer**

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Summary: Three months after the closing of the gate, Hopper contacts Mike about a secret mission he needs his help with.

1. Chapter 1

Thursday February 21 1985

It started with a note.

As Mike rolled up to school on his bike, Will was already there, waiting for him by the racks. Before Dustin, Lucas or Max showed up, Will retrieved an envelope from his backpack and handed to Mike. The pre-printed return address label showed it as having come from Hawkins Police Department. Hand written in the middle of the front was his name, Mike.

"What's this?" asked Mike.

"Spy stuff," Will grinned.

Mike threw him a puzzled look as Will continued, "Just open it later. Alone!" he added quickly, as their friends began to arrive. Mike quickly slipped the letter into his own backpack.

It was late February and an unseasonable warm front had moved into the area, driving away the winter chill. It was hard to believe 3 months had already passed and the gate to the Upside-Down had been closed for good. Little by little, life had been returning to normal in the quiet town of Hawkins; or as normal as life would ever be again. Will's visions had stopped entirely the moment the gate closed, though he was often prone to panic attacks when sights and sounds would trigger memories of his year as a slave to the creatures on the other side.

Mike did his best to concentrate through the first few classes of the day, but as the morning wore on, all his thoughts were focused on the note in his bag. By lunch, it was more than he could take. While everyone else headed off to the cafeteria to grab lunch, Mike excused himself to the bathroom for a few minutes of privacy to read the letter.

"It has to be from Chief Hopper, right?" Mike thought, "Who else from Hawkins PD would be writing to me?"

Hopper had been making a habit of checking in on the Byers every couple weeks. He claimed it was to make sure everything was still okay with Will, but Mike and Will were pretty sure it had more to do with having an excuse to see Joyce. On one of these visits, about a week after the Snow Ball, Mike was over and he and Hopper had a chance to talk alone, now that everything had settled down. It had taken a little convincing, but in the end Mike had to agree that things were still dangerous for El. That's not to say it made things any easier. Saying goodbye after the Snow Ball had been one of the hardest things he or El had done yet, not knowing when they would get to see each other again. It had been bad, not knowing if she was still out there, if she was safe. Somehow it felt even worse, knowing exactly where she was, and still not being able to be with her. Hopper had described exactly how to get to that cabin, hidden away in the woods, the night El closed the gate. Mike knew he could hike his way out there and walk right up to the front door. But there was always a chance that agents associated with the now shuttered lab might still be tracking him in hopes of finding her. He also knew that Hopper would be furious at such a stupid risk and ban him from ever seeing her again. Worse yet, he might move her to somewhere even more remote and secretive. And so, for her sake, Mike stayed away.

In the passing months, Mike and Eleven had worked out a system to keep in touch. It wasn't ideal, but it was all they had, and they clung to it desperately. Every night that he was able, at 7:30, Mike would tune his SuperComm to an off station and call out to her. He would just talk, about anything and nothing; his day, school, family, and always how much he missed her. Anything to give her a target to find him. On the nights when she could, at 7:30, Eleven would pull on her blindfold, tune out the world and reach out to him. There were nights the schedule wouldn't work out, and they couldn't connect, but more often than not, in the infinite plane of the In-Between, she would find him. Since her existence was no longer a secret, she was free to reach out to him; a touch on the cheek, holding his hand or wrapping him in a hug. Mike could never quite explain the sensation, but he would feel her touch and know she was there.

For her part, El had taught herself to communicate back. It couldn't be much, just a single word or simple thought, whispered into the void. Mike could sense these. It wasn't so much that he heard them,

but rather he felt them. But in either case, he took them in and understood their meaning. And so it went, they would meet and talk and touch and hold, and they made the most of what they had. It wasn't ideal, but it was better than not connecting at all. It was their own little halfway-happy. They would connect and be together until one of them was pulled away for the night, either by Mike's parents or by Hopper.

As he locked himself away in a stall in the bathroom, Mike retrieved the envelope from his backpack. He tore open the seal and unfolded the letter inside.

Mike,

I need your help Friday night with a secret mission. Tell your folks you will be spending the night at Will's house. Joyce knows what's going on and will cover for you if they call. Meet me at the end of your street at 5:00. Come alone and tell no one.

Hopper

Mike read the note twice more and puzzled over its meaning.

"A secret mission?" he wondered. "What kind of mission would Hopper need my help for?"

Later that afternoon, he managed to corner Will alone between classes.

"Do you know what this is all about?" he asked, holding up the envelope.

"No idea," he replied, "mom just said to make sure you got it today. Why, what does it say?"

"It's from Hopper," Mike responded and then, hesitating, "but he said not tell. Sorry."

"That's okay, I figured he might." he returned. "I can tell that mom knows what it's all about, but she won't tell me either."

The rest of the day dragged along, refusing to come to an end.

Eventually the final bell rang and the gang all headed their separate ways. Jonathan was waiting out front with his car to drive Will home. Though Will had been begging for weeks, Joyce just wasn't ready to let him ride his bike to and from school alone again. Lucas, Dustin and Max all headed toward town, planning on an afternoon in the arcade.

"Want to come along?" Dustin asked Mike. "I have a good feeling about today. I think I am going to finally take the Dig Dug crown back from Max."

"That's alright, I want to get a jump on homework so I'm not up to late finishing it." Mike replied.

"You're so full of crap," Dustin grinned. "You just want to get it out of the way so you can ghost-cuddle with your girlfriend."

Mike blushed, but had to admit to himself that Dustin knew him too well to try and deny it.

"Have fun lover boy," Dustin teased as he mounted his bike and headed off after Lucas and Max.

Mike turned his bike toward home and peddled hard, all the while thinking over the note and what this secret mission might be. The whole way he wondered why Hopper would be asking him along. He couldn't wait until 7:30 when he could try to ask El if she had any idea what this was all about. When he got home he started right in on his homework, though there didn't turn out to be very much. After that, he was desperate to occupy his mind until they could meet up. He tried working on the new D&D campaign he was putting together, but just couldn't get into the flow. He tried picking up a book, but after finding himself rereading the same sentence for the third time, he decided he just couldn't concentrate enough on that either. Eventually, he finally willed the clock around to dinner time, but even that didn't hold his attention for long. After pushing his meatloaf around the plate for a while, he decided he just wasn't hungry and asked to be excused.

Finally, after an agonizingly unending day, the alarm on Mike's watch let a relief-bringing chirp, announcing that it was 7:25. He headed

down to the basement and turned on some music to mask his conversation. After all this time, his parents were still convinced that El had been a secret Russian spy, so he had to be constantly on guard to make sure they didn't realize it was her he was talking to each night. As far as they knew, he was just down there chatting with Dustin, Lucas or Will. He settled down in the blanket fort where El had slept for those fateful few days; it was hard to believe that was already a year and a half ago. He switched on his radio and called out to her.

"El, its Mike. Are you There?" he began. "Please be there. I really need to talk to you. Are you there?"

He paused a moment, and then repeated his call. He had to fight back the panic that came over him as he called to her each night.

"What if tonight is one of the nights she can't get to me?" he wondered.

He knew it was too soon to worry. Sometimes it took a few minutes for her to get to him. Some nights she would be delayed finishing up dishes after dinner with Hopper, or get lost in a book and loose track of time.

He repeated the call a third time and suddenly, there she was. He felt a hand encircle his and a warmth spread through his chilled fingers.

"Mike," she whispered into the void. He felt the word hit his mind and a further warmth spread through the rest of his body.

"I missed you," he says into the radio. "I hope you had a good day."

"Missed too," she whispered.

"I got a weird letter from Hopper today," he continued, "do you know what this is about?"

"Secret," she said.

"A secret from me? Or do you not know either?" he asked.

"Secret," she repeated, and then continued, "tomorrow."

Suddenly her hand was gone from his.

"Wait, where are you going?" he asked. "Are you leaving already?"

Just then he felt a pair of warm hands on the back of his neck, and the soft press of her lips on his. The feeling lingered for a moment, and then she was gone. He stared in disbelief at his radio as he felt her presence fade. He got the feeling she knew more about whatever this mission was than she wanted to let on. Maybe she would be there too. Mike knew that was too much to hope for. There was no way Hopper would let her out to go on some kind of adventure while trying to keep the bad men from finding her.

Across town, alone in her room, Eleven lifted the blindfold off her eyes, a wide grin across her face. She grabbed a tissue and wiped away the trickle of blood from under her nose. She had gotten much better lately controlling that aspect of her powers and could often travel to the In-Between for extended periods without a nose-bleed. But somehow, with Mike, her emotions were more open and she almost always had a bleed still.

Hopper tapped on her half-closed door and let himself in to check on her and tell her goodnight. The grin was impossible to hide.

"I take it you've been to see Mike tonight?" he asked, well knowing the answer before asking.

"Happy," she grinned back, picking up the book she had been reading earlier.

"Don't forget you have class in the morning," Hopper continued. "So no staying up all night reading again."

He sat on the edge of her bed and pulled her into a goodnight hug.

"Goodnight Jane," he said, kissing her forehead.

"Goodnight Daddy," she replied.

Smiling, he got back up and walked out of the room, pulling the door halfway closed behind him as he left.

"Jane," she repeated quietly, "Jane. Jane."

The name was still taking some getting used to, and felt funny to her ears. She had spent so many years being known only by her experiment number, Eleven. It had been easy enough to identify with being called El; that was the special name her new friends had given her. When she had left home, trying to find where she fit in the world, it had once again felt natural enough to call herself by her birth name, Jane. That had been her identity with mama who always believed her to be out there still, with aunt Becky, and with Kali. Jane, the lost sister, the lost daughter. But now she was home again, her real, true home. She was back among friends. She was El.

But a time was approaching when she would have to put on a new identity once again, in the form of her birth name of Jane. Even though it sounded funny to her ears, she knew it was important to be ready to respond to it. If the plans that Hopper had been crafting all worked out, then next September, she would be able to leave the confines of their cabin and join the real world. Assuming she passed all the readiness tests, she would get to start 9th grade with her friends as Jane Ellen Hopper, daughter of police chief Jim Hopper, who had come to live with her father when her mother fell ill and could no longer care for her. It was a simple lie with enough truth backing it up that people wouldn't ask too many questions. As Jane, she had a real identity, tied back to mama and a birth certificate simply "lost in the system" for years, as Hopper liked to say. Ellen had been his idea, so she could still be El among her friends without raising any suspicions.

It was the thought of getting to join her friends in school and out in public that drove her every day to study just as hard as she could. She had years of schooling to catch up on, since in the lab she had only been taught the most basic of reading and writing. As a secret weapon, they never saw the need to educate her any further than that. Fortunately, Hopper had gotten ahold of a number of homeschool workbooks and study programs to help catch her up. Math she had picked up and excelled at almost immediately and had already gotten her skills up to early middle school level. It would be no difficulty finishing up to high school entrance levels by fall. Surprisingly, she also had developed a knack for art, filling page after

page in her sketch book with the scenes outside the cabin and sketches from memory of her friends. She could recall every line and curve of Mike's face and commit those to paper with little effort. She had come a long way from the simple crayon drawings she was proud to hang in her little room back in the lab.

More difficult for her was English. She had learned to read well enough and could easily follow the novels Hopper picked up for her at the library in town. But she still had difficulty when it came to the subtleties of conversation and that would be key to her being able to blend in with her fellow students in the fall. Mike and the rest of her friends would be there to help her along, but she still wanted to be ready. It had been right after Christmas that Hopper hit upon a clever idea over dinner. The next day, when he came home from work, he was carrying a copy of the Hawkins Middle School yearbook, a school floor plan and a copy of the complete class schedule, all thanks to a few well placed favors he called in. After picking out a couple classes that he thought would help, they set about looking up the classrooms on the diagram and the teachers and a handful of the students in the classes in the yearbook. Armed with these, Eleven was able to find the teachers and their classes in the In-Between and attend their classes as a silent observer, perched on a spare desk in the back of the class. And that is exactly where she would be the next morning, promptly at 8:00.

2. Chapter 2

Friday February 22, 1985

After some eggs and toast with Hopper, and locking up behind him as he headed off to the station, Eleven grabbed an Eggo and headed back to her room. She tuned her radio to static and laid back in bed to get comfortable. She pulled the blindfold on and in moments, she was settled into her place in the back of Mrs. White's English class, listening to the chatter of the other students as they waited for class to begin. Now that she was familiar with the room and the students, it took little effort to place herself there.

The hour past quickly and El pulled off the blindfold, returning to the real world. She munched on the Eggo and jotted down some notes from the class; new phrases to try. After a trip to the bathroom, she settled in for her post-class nap. Although it was easy for her to reach out and locate the class, and hold onto the connection throughout the hour, it was still very draining to maintain a connection for that long. At 11:30, the alarm chimed on the new watch Hopper had bought her for Christmas, waking her from a peaceful dream of Mike. She got up, fixed some lunch, and got ready for Mr. Cooper's social studies class at 12:30. She settled in on the counter top that ran along the back of his classroom. It turned out that today's class was going to be a pop-quizz which meant she was off the hook for the hour.

Rather than returning to her room, El decided to check in on Mike, as she often did when Mr. Cooper's lectures got too boring. She knew that Mike and their friends would be in Mr. Clarke's science class right now, at the other end of the school. Even though she could reach out to find Mike and pop right to him, she decided to take the long route and walk. Sometimes it was fun just to silently walk the hallways, now so familiar. As she passed the cafeteria, she saw George, the elderly janitor, sweeping. As often happened, he looked right at her and held her gaze for just a moment before smiling and returning to his broom. She got the sense that he knew she was there but never said a thing, or made any move to make contact, it was just a little routine they had. She turned down the final hall and entered Mr. Clarke's classroom and settled herself into the back corner, and

just watched Mike for a few minutes. As much as she wanted to, she never made contact with him here in class. She didn't want to be a distraction, or cause him an embarrassing moment at the shock of it. Plus, it was her special time just to secretly be with him. Eventually, she decided it was time to come back to reality. If she didn't have a full afternoon class, she decided she might as well continue working through her Earth-sciences workbook.

For Mike, the day was intolerably long. Math, English and social studies all drug on. As much as he tried to concentrate, he just kept thinking about the letter from Hopper and what tonight might hold. At lunch, he had to fight hard to keep up with the conversation Will and Dustin were having about some new game system that was coming out this summer. Eventually, he just gave up and left to drop off his tray. George the janitor was standing there talking to the lunch lady about his ghost friend that started wandering the halls after Christmas break. Mike could tell she thought George was nuts. After lunch, things got a little better in Mr. Clarke's science class. About 20 minutes into class, Mike was suddenly aware of El hiding in the back of the class. She did that sometimes in the afternoons when her own class got too boring. She never reached out to him when she checked up on him, so Mike never let on that he knew she was there. But it still brightened his day to know she was near and seeking him out.

Mercifully, the day finally ended and Mike headed home to await 5:00. Afraid he would miss the time, Mike found himself checking his watch almost every minute. Finally, when it was close enough to 5 and he couldn't wait any longer, he headed out the door and up the street to meet Hopper. Strangely, it wasn't Hopper's Blazer waiting at the end of the block. As he walked up, he was surprised to see Hopper sitting behind the wheel of Jonathan's car.

"Where's the Blazer?" Mike asked as he let himself in and buckled into the passenger seat.

"Pretty hard to sneak out of town if I am driving a Hawkins PD truck," he returned.

Mike nodded, thinking that made a lot of sense. They rode in silence for a few minutes as Hopper pointed the car out of town.

"So where are we going?" Mike asked, still puzzled over just what was going on.

"Indianapolis," he responded, "We have some business in the city."

"Business?" Mike asked. "What kind of business? Why all the secrecy? What is this mission?"

"Well, it's not really a mission," Hopper started, and then hesitating, "It's really more of a..."

"Date!" chimed in a familiar voice from the back seat.

Eleven popped up in the back seat and threw off the blanket she had been hiding under. On her face was the biggest smile Mike had ever seen there. As the surprise fought its way into Mike's head, all he could do was to stare back and forth between El, smiling brightly, and Hopper, doing his best to fight a grin of his own. Finally Hopper broke the silence, looking over at Mike.

"Oh go on," he sighed, nodding his head toward the back seat.

In a matter of seconds, Mike was over the seat back and buckling himself in the backseat next to El. He pulled her into a long hug. It felt so good to wrap her in his arms again. She leaned her head down against his shoulder and wrapped her arms back around him. Eventually he pulled back to look at her face again, scarcely believing she was really there.

"I missed you so much," Mike began, trying not to cry at the joy of seeing her again at last. She just beamed sweetly back at him.

"But wait," Mike began, turning back to Hopper for a moment. "I thought you said it was too dangerous for her to go out right now."

"Well, Jane came up with the idea. She's been planning all this out for a month," he responded. "And....I have to admit her idea was a good one."

He went on to explain that they were heading into the city so the kids could catch a movie and have a chance to spend time together without the world coming to an end. Sneaking out of town in

someone else's car and going into the city, there would be little chance of anyone recognizing Eleven. As far as anyone could tell, they would just be two ordinary kids out on a Friday night date.

"So here's the deal," he continued, taking on a serious tone, "we'll be there about 5:45. There is a park across the street from the theater so you can walk, hangout, whatever, until your movie at 6:30. Once the movie is done, you will come straight back at the car at 9:00."

He eyed them both in the rearview mirror and made sure he had their full attention before going on. "Precisely at 9:00! As I said, this should be pretty low risk, but we are still taking a huge chance. I am counting on BOTH of you to behave and make this work. No sneaking off. No staying out beyond the meet up time. If you guys act stupid and things go wrong, you can forget about seeing each other again this decade."

After a pause, he finished, "Do I make myself clear?"

Mike and Eleven looked at each other for a moment, letting the threat of further separation wash over them, before catching Hoppers gaze in the mirror and nodding the affirmative.

"Good!" he said, fixing his gaze again at the road ahead. "Remember that I will be around. I'm not going to follow you through the park, or sit two rows behind you in the movie, but i will be around. Expect that i could be anywhere."

As he drove on toward the city, he thought back to last fall when he came so close to losing her. He had come to realize that the more confined he kept her, the harder she would fight to be free. He almost had to laugh at how much that both inspired and infuriated him. From time to time, he glanced again at the two of them, there in the backseat, sharing whispered conversation, trying to make up for the lost time; their arms around each other, so desperate to hold onto the moment for fear of it slipping away.

Hopper had to admit he was conflicted over his thoughts about Mike Wheeler. On the one hand, the protective father in him wanted to hate Mike outright. This was a boy, come to date his little girl. Hopper remembered his own youth and the thoughts that run

rampant through the mind of a teenage boy. His grip on the steering wheel tightened for a moment at the thought. It relaxed again as the practical side took over, and he grudgingly had to admit to himself that Mike cared deeply for his Jane and would do anything to protect her. When she first escaped from the lab, it had been Mike who was able to provide her sanctuary and keep her safe and hidden from the men trying to drag her away. Hopper, on the other hand, had been the one to sell her out to those seeking her, in an effort to save Will.

After last fall's adventure, Hopper had taken it upon himself to finally live up to her "Friends don't lie" mantra and lay all of the cards on the table. He had revealed all the negotiations he had with the lab, both the old staff and the new. He detailed the steps he was taking to try and free her from their grasp once and for all. And hardest of all, he had told her about that night when he and Joyce went into the Upside-Down to rescue Will, and how the price of cooperation had been revealing her location to Dr. Brenner and the lab. After absorbing what he had said, she had risen from the couch, walked straight into her room and slammed the door behind her. It had been nine agonizing days before she spoke a single word to him. Each day, as he returned home from work, he was fully prepared for her to be gone, with the front door wide open, but she was always there. Sometimes, she had already eaten dinner and would be locked away in her room. Others, she would sit there silently, glaring at him across the table.

Finally, one evening, at the end of those nine days, she had come out of her room, hesitated a moment before sitting beside him on the couch, put her arms around him and simply said, "I forgive you."

In those three simple words, they turned a corner and began to rebuild their life with one another. As though a dam had burst, Hopper gave in and cried. It was the first time he had allowed himself to cry since the day he buried Sarah, and all the anger, fear, frustration and doubt of the last year came flooding out. They both just sat there, held each other, and cried for almost an hour. But when it was over, they both knew that they would be okay, and that whatever came next they would get through together. In that evening, their relationship turned from that of a caretaker and child, to truly a father and daughter.

Thinking back on that night, Hopper had to fight to keep the mist back out of his eyes. This was Jane's night and he didn't want anything he did to ruin it. Besides, he wasn't about to let Mike see him that vulnerable. After all, he was still a father, driving his daughter and the boy she liked to go see a movie.

Right on time, they arrived at the theater Eleven had picked out and parked across the street. As he shut off the engine, Hopper repeated his earlier warning.

"So we are clear, correct? You will stick to the park, and the theater. You will attend the movie. You will meet back here promptly at 9:00. And neither of you," he paused for dramatic effect and to catch their gaze once again, "will do anything stupid. Agreed?"

Once again, they both nodded their heads in agreement, believing the sincerity in his voice and not wanting to risk this glimpse of freedom they were being granted.

"Good," he said, the first hint of a grin appearing back on his face. He pulled a folded \$20 bill from his shirt pocket and passed it over his shoulder to Mike, before continuing, "then have a good time you two."

Mike and Eleven quickly scrambled from the back seat and onto the sidewalk.

"So, a walk in the park then?" Mike asked, looking at Eleven but glancing back at Hopper from the corner of his eye.

"Yes," she smiled, taking his hand. With that, they walked off along a paved path toward a fountain in the middle of the park.

Hopper was once again filled with a mix of emotion at the joy of his little girl getting to do something normal kids do, but also the dread that things could go wrong in an instant. At the least of it, Mike could say or do something to upset her. At the worst, despite all of their careful planning, and sneaking out of town, they could have been followed and the very agents he had worked so hard to protect her from could swoop in and snatch his little Jane up and carry her off to a new prison, never to be seen again.

Locking the car behind him, and casting a glance over his shoulder to ensure that Eleven and Mike were out of sight, Hopper crossed the quiet street to the theater entrance and approached the ticket-taker at the door. A few minutes later, after a brief conversation and a folded \$10 bribe, Hopper secured himself the freedom to come and go as he pleased for the evening. Once the kids were settled in for the show, he could alternate between checking on them in the theater, and checking the surroundings outside. After proceeding on foot twice around the block, he reassured himself there were no shadowy government agents lurking about waiting to snatch up his little girl. Then, there was nothing left to do but settle into the car again and wait.

Meanwhile, as Hopper was roaming about making his preparations and perimeter checks, Mike and Eleven walked arm in arm through the park. For her part, it was easily the happiest that Eleven had ever felt. After twelve years locked away in a secret lab, and another year on the run, hiding in a tiny cabin in the woods, for the first time in her life, she felt like a normal teenage girl. As she and Mike wandered the park, they talked about everything and nothing. Mike was full of questions, since for the past year their conversations had been very one-sided. She knew so much about what had been happening with him since the moment she and the demogorgon had disappeared in a cloud of black mist, but had been unable to communicate back more than feelings, when she had been allowed to respond at all. Now, she answered as best she could, cursing how often she tipped over the words and phrases she didn't know, and vowing to herself to pay even more attention in her classes.

For his part, Mike was on cloud nine. Eternally patient, he helped Eleven puzzle out the phrases that remained just out of her grasp. He stared in awe as she described the steps she had been taking to attend classes and prepare for next fall. He laughed as she described a time when Mr. Cooper wandered close to her during his lecture and she decided to reach out and tap his shoulder as he walked past, causing him to both yelp and drop the book he was carrying.

They settled into a bench near the pond and watched several geese lazily paddle by. Realizing it was the first time they had been alone together, in the same physical space, since he had first helped to her

hide in his basement, Mike pulled her into a tender embrace and then, not caring if Hopper or anyone else was watching, he kissed El. It was a long and gentle kiss, not rushed by nerves, crowds or time. She closed her eyes and leaned back into the kiss, feeling in this moment, truly, deeply, happy. After what felt like a blissful eternity, their lips parted. Mike pulled back and looked deep into her beautiful sparkling eyes, still scarcely believing she was actually here, with him, and the world wasn't trying to end. As his stare lingered, Eleven smiled and blushed a little. She leaned back in for one more brief kiss.

"Ready for movie?" she asked.

"Yes," Mike smiled. "What are we going to see?"

"Splash," she said, "Tom Hanks. Daryl Hannah."

Ever since Hopper had agreed to her idea for a sneaky out of town date, Eleven had been pouring over the newspapers he would bring home, trying to pick out just the right movie. She wanted to find one that was not too scary (life had given her enough scary), and also something Mike would like. Finally, after weighing lots of choices, she was pretty sure she had found a good one. It was a mushy romance she would like but still a comedy so Mike would hopefully like it.

"Do you think Mike would like a movie with a mermaid?" she had asked Hopper one afternoon. Not saying a word, he laughed, shook his head and went to the kitchen for a cold beer. She decided that must be a yes.

Arm in arm, Mike and Eleven walked to the theater and Mike bought their tickets. They walked to the front door and handed their tickets to the ticket-taker and headed into the lobby. He glanced from the two of them to the car parked across the street and guessed these were the two kids the overprotective father had bribed him about earlier. He laughed as he added their ripped stubs to the collection box. After buying some popcorn, yet another delicious new treat for Eleven, they headed into the theater and found their seats. Mike looked around and was happy to see there were only two other couples in the room, so it wouldn't be a crowded show; not like when

he and the guys had gone to Ghostbusters last summer. That was just fine with him. He was much happier being alone with El.

As the room darkened for the previews to start, Mike felt Eleven tense up and grip his arm. She certainly had more reason than most to still have apprehension about being in the dark. He lifted his arm off of the rest between them and put it up around her shoulder.

"You okay?" he asked, turning to look at her.

Under his reassuring arm, she relaxed again, knowing Mike was right there and there was nothing to be afraid of. "Yes," she smiled. She tucked her feet up on the seat, off to the side so she could snuggle into his side even closer as the movie started. The movie wound up being an even better choice than she had expected; two people who are destined to be together, and refusing to give up on each other, coming back together after years apart. In the trilling climax, the guy even saves the girl from a secret government lab. While it momentarily threatened to flash her back to her own time in the lab, she overcame it by remembering that the movie had to have a happy ending, and right now she was living her own happy ending.

Meanwhile, while the movie was playing, Hopper was making his rounds. Not long after the show began, he headed in and stood in the back of the darkened theater and took in the scene for a minute. Thankful for the small number of people in the theater, he quickly picked out the pair of curly black-haired heads sitting in the middle, near the back. Mike's arm was around her shoulder, but he decided he had to let that one go.

Heading back out into the street, he proceeded up the block to check the alleys on either side of the theater but found nothing more dangerous than a rat nosing around in some trash. He took up a position in the shadows, looking over the street and theater entrance. As he stood there in the dark, only the glowing tip of his cigarette betrayed his location. He tensed up only once as a city utility van rolled down the street, but it didn't so much as slow as it passed the theater front. Hopper knew he was just jumping at shadows and that everything was fine. After a while, deciding all was quiet outside, he headed in past the knowing ticket-taker one more time and headed into the dark theater to check on them one more time. After

witnessing Eleven lean her face up to kiss Mike on the cheek, lay her head back on his shoulder and him return a kiss to her forehead, Hopper decided that was probably enough surveillance for the night and returned to wait in the car until the movie let out.

At five minutes for nine o'clock, the two of them walked out of the theater, arm in arm. They walked across the street and slid into the backseat of the waiting car. As they headed back toward Hawkins, they chatted quietly about the movie and all their favorite parts. Hopper did his best to pay attention to the radio and tried to ignore them, giving them what little privacy he could. Eventually, he realized they hadn't said anything in several minutes. He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw that Eleven was fast asleep on Mike's shoulder, his arm around her.

Mike caught his eye in the mirror and said "Thank you," keeping his voice low to avoid waking her.

"Don't mention it kid," he replied with a grin, turning his attention back to the road.

They rode the rest of the way back to town in silence. It was a little after 10:00 when Hopper pulled the car into the Byers' driveway and parked it next to his police Blazer. While he went over and started up his truck to get the heat going, Mike gently shook Eleven to wake her.

"Time to wake up, we're home." he said.

"Home?" she asked drowsily, her eyes fluttering open.

"Well, Will's house," he explained as she started to recognize where they were. "I guess this is where you guys are dropping me off."

As Mike walked El over to the to the waiting Blazer, Hopper walked up to the porch where Joyce was waiting and passed her Jonathan's keys.

"I had such a great time tonight! Thank you for planning all this, and convincing Hopper it was safe." Mike said.

Before climbing in, she wrapped him in a tight hug and kissed him

again. "Me too. I'll miss you." she said.

"I'll miss you too," he returned. "But it's not goodbye, just bye for now." he smiled.

She smiled back and nodded, "Bye for now."

As Hopper climbed in, he threw Mike one last smile. "Goodnight kid."

Mike climbed the front steps and stood with Joyce as they watched the Blazer's taillights fade down the road.

"So did you have a good time?" she asked as they turned to walk in the front door. "Will is waiting up to hear all about it."

Hopper and Eleven rode in silence for a few minutes on the way back to the cabin. Eleven stared out the window, looking up at the stars with a permanent smile on her face and a twinkle in her eyes.

"So, you had an okay time?" Hopper asked, reaching a hand over to ruffle her hair.

"Yes!" she replied, giving his hand a squeeze as he pulled it back. "Thank you Daddy."